

HELEN IN VIENNA

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There are few questions more vexing to literary critics and even more vexatious to artists than an inquiry into the genesis of a work of art. Still, the temptation to inquire persists.

A short time ago I found myself engaged in a discussion with David Roessel. He recalled that, with the discovery by Schliemann of an historical Troy, the mythological Helen of Troy (and her accompanying baggage, that is, Paris, Menelaus, etc.) was jettisoned from early twentieth century “historical” accounts of that city, while greater and greater emphasis was placed on the hypothesis that the Trojan War was fought on economic grounds. Roessel suggested that H.D. was triggered by historians’ “murder” of Helen to seek to reestablish Helen’s identity by rehabilitating the “other myth” found in Stesichorus’ “Palinode” and in Euripides’ *Helen*—that Helen had, in fact, never gone to Troy.¹ Although I am willing to accept the psychological validity of such a suggestion, I do not concur.

Insofar as H.D. expended much energy making translations of the Greek classics, many of her readers and critics have catalogued her as a Classicist. Such an assessment has been bolstered by the reasonable assumption that she may well have been exposed during her Bryn Mawr stay to the excitement and credulity of many scholars over Schliemann’s excavations and the pronouncements on his finds at Hisserlik. Moreover, Pound’s enthusiasm for the classics and his insistence that H.D. immerse herself in them has been well documented, as has Bryher’s enthusiasm for archaeology and H.D.’s self-directed study of Greek in London between 1911-1913. Still, from an artistic point of view, there is little evidence that H.D. found in the Classics much more than a congenial channel through which to express her own creative impulses, much as was the case with not a few late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers, such as Verlaine, Mallarmé, Giono, and Eliot. Granted, too, that she may have read Stesichorus’ “Palinode” and Euripides’ *Helen* at an early date, she seems clearly to have been won to Euripides by his lyrics and by his apparent sympathy for women, not by thoughts of Helen’s rehabilitation. Rather, it is, I believe, the feeling of the majority of H.D.’s admirers that her decision to deal with the Euripidean *Helen* in a contemporary context evolved slowly over the years and that H.D., impelled by her forays into psychoanalysis, was only later in life able to

make some definitive statement about herself and her womanhood through the image of that most controversial of mythological heroines. In this context, I would like to suggest the possibility of one additional step in H.D.'s evolution toward the writing of *Helen in Egypt*.

H.D. was touched by the legend of Helen from her earliest days. The story is the kernel of some of her more successful creative efforts. The most notable are the short poem entitled "Helen," the novelette "Secret Name," and, of course, *Helen in Egypt*. Each work shows H.D.'s ever changing assessment of Troy's nemesis.

In her brilliant exegesis of "Helen," Susan Friedman convincingly argues that the opening image of Helen surrounded by the "lustre" of life yields to the conditional fantasy of her death.² Certainly in this poem Helen is presented as an icon, but the idea of her mythic rehabilitation is not articulated by H.D. H.D. returned to Helen in Part I of her unpublished *Notes on Euripides, Pausanias, and Greek Lyric Poets*. In the chapter entitled "Helen in Egypt," she offers us a reading of Euripides' *Helen* that is highly personalized. Helen is presented "externally," that is, as she appears on the stage of H.D.'s imagination. Great care is taken to contrast the luxuriant Egyptian setting with Helen's Greek physiognomy and dress. H.D. describes them in her characteristically crystalline style. There is, too, in the text a clearly articulated conflict between the Greek Helen and the Egyptian surroundings in which she finds herself. This conflict is further articulated in "Secret Name," whose heroine, Helen Fairwood (a transparent pseudonym for H.D. herself) finds her self-confidence shaken by Egypt. Whereas Greek culture has encouraged her to pursue truth and beauty, Egypt reveals to her that she is nothing. She is at first compelled by physical and cosmic forces, but in the end she determines that personal freedom, even if lonely, is preferable to the bondage of marriage. The elements for H.D.'s final telling of the legend of Helen are present in the tale but are not yet clearly articulated.

In 1931 H.D. first submitted herself to psychotherapeutic treatment in London. Two years later in the spring of 1933 (beginning in March and lasting "between three and four months" [TF 4]) and again in October 1934 she spent a number of months in intensive therapy under the tutelage of Sigmund Freud. It was in these interviews that the subject of the mythic "Helen" must have surfaced (although there is no mention whatsoever of Helen in *Tribute to Freud*); for, inter alia, in *Helen in Egypt*, Freud is introduced under the guise of Theseus, with whom (according to H.D.'s version of the myth) Helen had her first affair.

I would suggest, moreover, that H.D. at this time was introduced, either through

her conversations with Freud or simply through her contacts with the Austrian cultural scene, to discussions of the Strauss/Hofmannsthal opera *Die ägyptische Helena*, which had seen its Vienna premiere on June 11, 1928, and had played to full houses thanks to Maria Jeritzka who sang the title role.

H.D. appears to have had enough interest in opera to have attended the performance of an unnamed work at the opera during her 1933 stay in Vienna. I must assume it was the Staatsoper from her statement that its steps were filled with guns and soldiers. The Volksoper does not lend itself to such an array. She admits at the time of writing *Tribute to Freud*, "I don't remember what it was" (60), but then few would after a ten-year interval and the cataclysm of a world war.

Die ägyptische Helena had made the rounds of European opera houses, and, although considered by Pauline Strauss, the composer's wife, as a piece of "junk,"³ had been revised and was being prepared at the time of H.D.'s first visit to Vienna for the Salzburg Festival in the summer of 1933. It certainly must have attracted the attention of the Austrian analyst, since the plot was cast in Freudian terms and toyed with psychoanalytic concepts which titillated the Austrian capital in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Strauss' librettist, regarded myth as the truest of all dramatic subjects. He was particularly fascinated by myths of metamorphosis and of human faithfulness. He was not content to retail the myth of the two Helens that he found in Euripides' drama; he needed to explain it and to make its symbols palatable to a modern audience. Hofmannsthal worked out his own recension of the drama, wherein Menelaus abandons his hatred for his adulterous wife and accepts her back in a spirit of unclouded love. He felt that the Euripidean "phantom" Helen was too unconvincing an image. He made use of only one Helen, who pacifies her husband by a conjuring trick—a Draught of Forgetfulness—and then insists, for the sake of her integrity, on undoing the spell so that Menelaus may accept her for what she really is. "Helen," said Hofmannsthal, "must have complete possession of the man to whom she belongs."⁴

The crux of the plot has been well summarized by Oscar von Pander,⁵ who states, "By far the majority of men in love substitute the likeness of the inamorata for the real person; they erect a statue on a pedestal, so to speak, which is able to conceal the terrible truth under a veil of iridescent allure." The statement sounds very much like a description of H.D.'s "Helen." The figure of Menelaus was influenced, according to Hofmannsthal, by his experience with war victims.⁶ So not only can Menelaus be tranquilized by drugs and by illusory persuasion, but he will only be returned to normal life when he is made aware of everything in the past and of its significance.

In the first act of the opera, Menelaus relives an imaginary Trojan War against a phantom Paris and a phantom Helen. He then returns to the now almost phantom Helen who has been rejuvenated and rebeautified by the local sorceress. In her rejuvenated form she is not as real to him as the beloved Helen for whom he fought ten years, the guilty adulteress whom he believes he has slaughtered in his nightmare. In Hofmannsthal's Freudian interpretation Menelaus must kill a "real" Paris, and so in the opera he murders the innocent son of the local Arab chief, who has become infatuated with Helen. The killing of Da-ud helps Menelaus to recognize his own guilt and to divorce Helen's past actions from her worth as an individual.

In certain aspects the Hofmannsthal libretto reveals some striking similarities to H.D.'s later *Helen in Egypt*: the appearance of a phantom Paris in both versions of the tale and then Helen's "awakening" (pivotal to the third part of *Helen in Egypt*), heralded in Act 2 of the Strauss' opera by the stunning aria, "Zweite Brautnacht." Moreover, basic to each work is Helen's irrepressible determination to reestablish her identity and the reality of her life and situation. Finally, the insistence on the concept of masculine and feminine elements united in a child is central to both adaptations—for H.D. in the person of the Faustian child Euphorion, and for Hofmannsthal in the more traditional Hermione.

It should be noticed that within a year after completing her psychoanalysis we have evidence of a new interest in Helen's adventure in Egypt. In letters from H.D. to Bryher in August 1935, H.D. mentions the possibility of translating the *Helen* of Euripides; another letter suggests that she may have been engaged in this project in January of the next year.⁷

Simply, then, I would like to posit that H.D.'s decision to compose her "feminine epic" was "triggered" not so much by her determination to resuscitate a Helen "murdered by historians," but by a more gradual evolutionary process which was perhaps propelled ever so slightly by the Strauss/Hofmannsthal collaboration.

NOTES

1. See David Roessel, "H.D.'s Troy: Some Bearings," *HDN* 3.2 (1990): 38-42.
2. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) 232-36.
3. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Die ägyptische Helena," *Gesammelte Werke: Prosa IV* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1955) 455. This article first appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse* and the *Vossische Zeitung* on April 8, in the June issue of *Schalkiste*, a Berlin theatrical publication, and later in the *Insul-Almanach auf 1929*.
4. Gustl Freuer, "Maria Jeritza," *Opera News* 47.3 (September 1982): 26.
5. Oskar von Pander, *Clemens Krauss in München* (Munich: Verlag C. R. Beck, 1955) 87.
6. "Die ägyptische Helena" 452.
7. Letters from H.D. to Bryher, August 1 and August 24, 1935. In a later letter of January 20, 1936, H.D. indicates that she is working on some of the conventional Greek plays, and in this remark she may be referring to the *Helen* (Robinson so asserts, in *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982] 362). H.D.'s letters to Bryher are located in the Bryher Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.